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SUBJECT: Back to Basics: Vietnam Discusses Peacekeeping at APCSS Workshop

REF: Hanoi 0185

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1. (SBU) Summary: In an effort to further encourage Vietnam to participate in UN peacekeeping operations (PKO), the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), an academic institute linked with U.S. Pacific Command, joined with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)-affiliated think tank and training institution, the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV), to host a workshop, "Vietnam and United Nations Peace Operations," March 30-April 3, in Hanoi. Participants from the Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Public Security expressed guarded support for future PKO participation peacekeeping and considered the workshop to have been a success. At the same time, despite continued U.S. attempts to promote more active participation in the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI, reftel), it is evident that many in Vietnam's military and foreign policy establishment still do not have an adequate understanding of the technical aspects of peacekeeping. End summary.

Initial Attitudes

2. (SBU) The APCSS and DAV brought together approximately 40 working-level representatives from the Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Public Security for a five-day seminar, March 30-April 3, to discuss international peacekeeping concepts and consider options for Vietnam's future participation in peacekeeping operations (PKO). The seminar, "Vietnam and United Nations Peace Operations," addressed issues common to all PKO-contributing countries: legal questions, financial considerations, training resources and requirements, logistical challenges, and coordination with the UN. The APCSS team, led by retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General Ed Smith and including a roster of international experts with significant real-life experience, aimed at widening the perspective of the participants and highlighting the international nature of peacekeeping operations.

3. (SBU) According to a survey conducted at the outset of the workshop, 55 percent of the seminar's participants agreed that Vietnam was ready to make a useful contribution to UN peace operations; 52 percent indicated that the people of Vietnam would support overseas deployment of Vietnamese personnel in peace operations. Military Observers and medical teams (with about 30 percent each) were cited as the most favored ways for Vietnam to contribute to PKO, with staff officers and de-miners drawing ten percent each. The respondents were more split, however, on the question of what Vietnam could hope to gain from participation in peacekeeping, with fulfilling international obligations (33 percent), gaining international influence and recognition (27 percent), and increasing the professionalism of troops and police

(23 percent) being the top selections. Lack of preparation (40 percent) and lack of language skills (20 percent) topped the list of concerns about Vietnam's participation; others included putting troops under foreign control (13 percent), fear of casualties (ten percent), and cost (ten percent).

Conclusions from the Participants

14. (SBU) The final presentations from the seminar's two working groups reflected some of the participants' initial views, but also showed a deeper understanding of the complexity of international peace operations. Both groups focused heavily on the need for Vietnam to conduct extensive preparation activities in advance of deploying peacekeepers, including building public support for PKO, addressing legal obstacles by building a legal framework for participation, translating UN PKO doctrine into Vietnamese, developing policy and planning documents, providing appropriate training to personnel, and studying lessons learned from other countries. Many advocated increased participation in GPOI activities as a path to gain experience and training, and to learn from other troop contributing nations.

15. (SBU) The first group's final presentation explicitly stated that Vietnam should actively participate in PKO, noting that PKO activities follow logically from the country's increasing international integration, its participation on the UN Security Council in particular. The group recommended that the GVN take advantage of GPOI, begin its participation with UN Military Observers, engineers, and medical teams, and use reimbursement funds as an incentive to upgrade equipment and build future capacity. The second group took a more cautious approach. Rather than providing specific recommendations, the group presented three options for Vietnam's participation in PKO: 1) to continue with present activities to observe and assess PKO missions before committing; 2)

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to expand present activities step-by-step by increasing participation in PKO training opportunities, exchanging experiences with neighboring countries, and translating and studying PKO doctrine; and 3) to significantly expand present activities, including developing a comprehensive plan for participation.

16. (SBU) Overall, there was a general consensus among the participants that being a part of the conference changed their views about peacekeeping operations. Speaking at the beginning of the seminar, for example, one of the DAV's academic staff expressed skepticism of UN peacekeeping in general, mentioning abuses by peacekeepers in certain countries and stating that these soldiers had contributed to violence, rather than peace. By the end of the conference, however, the DAV academic told the group that she had gained a better understanding about peacekeeping and now believes such operations have a positive affect around the world. Other participants echoed these sentiments, emphasizing that through gaining a more thorough understanding of peacekeeping operations they had also come away with a more favorable view of PKOs in general.

Comment

17. (SBU) U.S. efforts to date have focused on encouraging Vietnam to more actively participate in GPOI as the path to a contribution to an ongoing UN peacekeeping mission. Over the course of the workshop, however, it became clear that many participants still lacked a basic understanding of UN peacekeeping, both as a general concept as well as the technical aspects of contributing to an operation. To give a simple example, many participants were unfamiliar with basic peacekeeping terminology -- confusing an observer at a military exercise with a UN Military Observer assigned to a peacekeeping mission. This was not for lack of interest. Presentation topics such as coordination with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, logistics, payment and reimbursement for troop contributions, all drew many questions, and it was apparent that most were hearing this information for the first time.

18. (SBU) Comment continued: We should continue to push Vietnam to be a more robust participant in GPOI, but this must also include more basic efforts to educate the GVN about UN peacekeeping in general. In this sense, by raising awareness and by promoting inter-ministerial coordination, the APCSS's high-quality workshop directly contributed to USG efforts to encourage Vietnam to become an active participant in UN peacekeeping. APCSS is building on its already close relationship with the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam and is developing a reputation for being able to address critical topics as an honest broker -- something few can claim. This particular workshop was vital to continuing the momentum within the GVN for participation in peacekeeping operations and Mission Vietnam is grateful for the support of LTG (ret) Smith and his entire team. End comment.

19. (U) The APCSS team did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.

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